Wasting Away on the Web

Opinion: More employers are taking workers' Web use seriously.

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2005-08-08
Section: opinion; Pg. 26

Writer is sympathetic to employers?

Strong case for surveillance, but I'm not convinced. Counter with useful workplace Web surfing?

The issue of IT surveillance was driven home last month when Salary.com and America Online released a survey of 10,000 American workers, many of whom admitted that goofing off on the Internet was their primary method of frittering away the workday. In a sign of the times, it beat out socializing with co-workers, 45 percent to 23 percent.

Consider statistics. Is spending work time on personal Internet use so bad?

While bosses can easily detect and interrupt water-cooler chatter, the employee who is shopping at Lands' End or IMing with fellow fantasy baseball managers may actually appear to be working. Thwarting the activity is a technology challenge, and it's one that more and more enterprises are taking seriously, despite resistance from privacy advocates and some employees themselves.

Common examples— readers can relate.

Does the AMA side with employers? Survey results— good for background and counter-argument.

According to the American Management Association, 78 percent of large U.S. employers are regularly checking workers' e-mail messages, Internet use, computer files and phone calls. Nearly half of such employers store employee e-mail messages for review. The AMA also found that 65 percent of enterprises had disciplined employees for misuse of e-mail or the Internet at work, and 27 percent had actually fired someone over such offenses.

According to a recent poll of workers in technology-related fields published by executive recruiting company FPC, 61 percent said they felt their bosses had the right to cyber-spy on them, but only with consent. Just 28 percent felt IT had the right to monitor their activity without consent, and only 1 percent said an employer never has the right to monitor Internet use.

Employees want employers to be up front about monitoring.

"It's not surprising that companies want to assure that their employees' time is predominantly spent on work-related computer usage," said FPC President Ron Herzog. "The majority of employees . . . would like to be informed, so it is always in the company's best interest to have an Internet usage policy clearly outlining the company's expectations, which all employees sign upon hiring."

When is workplace surveillance unfair and when not?

As the stakes grow beyond a few wasted man-hours and some misappropriated bandwidth, it grows increasingly important for IT to let everyone in the company know they might be watched.

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LOAD-DATE: August 8, 2005
LANGUAGE: English